The Impact of *Keji Fuli* on Adolescent Self-Expression in Contemporary China

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Abstract

This paper examines the influence of *Keji Fuli*, a Confucian principle emphasizing self-restraint and adherence to social propriety, on adolescent self-expression in contemporary China. Despite modernization and digital transformation, Confucian ideals continue to shape youth identity, social interactions, and cultural expectations. Through family expectations, education, peer influences, and digital platforms, adolescent self-expression remains highly curated, balancing individuality with social conformity. While social media offers new opportunities, it also reinforces traditional values through self-censorship, indirect communication, and state regulation. Rather than rejecting *Keji Fuli*, many youth reinterpret it, blending tradition with modern identity in ways that reflect both constraint and innovation.

Keywords: Keji Fuli, confucianism, self-expression

1. Introduction

Keji Fuli (克己复礼), a core tenet of Confucian philosophy, translates to "restraining oneself and returning to propriety." This concept, first articulated by Confucius in *The Analects*, underscores the importance of self-discipline, deference to societal norms, and adherence to ritual propriety (*li*, 礼). Historically, this principle has been deeply embedded in Chinese cultural and moral frameworks, guiding personal conduct, social interactions, and governance. Even in contemporary China, where rapid economic growth, globalization, and digitalization have reshaped social structures, Confucian values, including "Keji Fuli," remain integral to moral education, family expectations, and institutional policies. For Chinese adolescents growing up in the 21st century, the tension between Confucian ideals and modern forms of self-expression is particularly pronounced. On one hand, traditional values emphasize collectivism, filial piety, and social harmony, often discouraging overt displays of personal emotions or radical self-expression that might disrupt social order. On the other hand, exposure to global cultures, digital platforms, and increasing individualism has led many young people to seek new modes of personal expression, challenging traditional expectations. In contemporary Chinese society, adolescent self-expression takes place within a paradoxical environment where Confucian ethics coexist with Western notions of individuality and digital self-representation. This dynamic is further complicated by China's unique socio-political landscape. While modernization has enabled greater access to diverse perspectives and lifestyles, cultural conservatism, along with state policies emphasizing Confucian morality, still plays a significant role in shaping adolescent behavior. Schools and families reinforce values of discipline, humility, and respect for authority, often discouraging open dissent or unfiltered personal expression. At the same time, social media platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin provide new opportunities for young people to construct and negotiate their identities in ways that balance tradition and modernity. Given this complex interplay, it is crucial to examine how *Keji Fuli* continues to influence adolescent self-expression in China today. How do young people reconcile traditional Confucian expectations with their desire for individuality? In what ways does modern technology facilitate or restrict their self-expression? And to what extent does the Confucian emphasis

on restraint shape their identity formation in an era of increasing self-presentation? This essay explores these questions, highlighting the evolving role of *Keji Fuli* in contemporary Chinese youth culture and its implications for the future of self-expression in a rapidly changing society.

2. Confucian Ideals and Their Contemporary Influence

Confucian philosophy has long served as the backbone of Chinese civilization, structuring social hierarchies, moral conduct, and interpersonal relationships. Among its many principles, *Keji Fuli* — "restraining oneself and returning to propriety" — embodies the Confucian ideal of self-discipline in service of social harmony. This principle demands that individuals suppress their personal impulses and conform to prescribed norms, reinforcing the collective good over individual desires. For centuries, *Keji Fuli* shaped imperial governance, educational doctrines, and family ethics, embedding itself deeply in the moral fabric of Chinese society.

2.1 The Role of Keji Fuli in Traditional and Modern Chinese Society

Historically, *Keji Fuli* functioned as a guiding principle in maintaining societal order, particularly through the observance of *li* (礼), or ritual propriety. Confucius himself taught that only through self-restraint and adherence to ritual could a person achieve moral integrity and contribute to a stable society. This emphasis on discipline and deference ensured that individuals internalized their social roles—from filial piety within the family to loyalty in state affairs—creating a culture in which self-expression was often subordinated to duty and decorum.

In contemporary China, despite rapid modernization, these Confucian ideals persist in shaping adolescent behavior and self-expression. Within families, children are still expected to show deference to elders, prioritize collective well-being, and avoid behavior that disrupts social cohesion. The concept of *mianzi* (面子), or "face," further reinforces this by discouraging actions that might bring personal or familial embarrassment. As a result, many Chinese adolescents experience an internalized pressure to regulate their emotions, opinions, and creative expressions in accordance with societal expectations.

Beyond the family, China's education system also reinforces *Keji Fuli* through structured discipline and moral instruction. Schools emphasize *deyu* (德育), or moral education, which draws heavily from Confucian values to instill respect for authority, humility, and perseverance. This approach aligns with government initiatives that seek to maintain social harmony by curbing excessive individualism and promoting collective responsibility. While this fosters a strong work ethic and a sense of duty, it can also limit opportunities for students to develop independent thought and uninhibited self-expression.

2.2 Impact on Adolescent Identity and Self-Expression

For many young people in China today, the influence of *Keji Fuli* is both direct and indirect, shaping their self-perception and social interactions. The cultural expectation to "restrain oneself" manifests in the ways adolescents communicate—often prioritizing tact and subtlety over direct assertion. In contrast to Western cultures that celebrate open self-expression and personal authenticity, Chinese youth are encouraged to express themselves in ways that align with social harmony rather than personal desires.

As M. Epstein notes, the Confucian ideal of filial love and structured identities remains deeply embedded in modern China, influencing not only familial roles but also broader societal expectations regarding emotional expression and personal aspirations (Epstein, 2021). This often translates into an implicit pressure for adolescents to conform, suppress dissent, and express themselves only within socially accepted boundaries. Yet, modernity introduces new complexities to this dynamic. The rise of social media, for example, has provided Chinese youth with alternative spaces to explore self-expression. However, even in these digital spaces, the Confucian legacy of *Keji Fuli* persists. Many young people engage in a form of "curated self-expression," where they navigate between authenticity and societal expectations, often moderating their online presence to avoid controversy. While platforms like WeChat and Douyin allow for creativity and personal voice, they also exist within a regulatory environment that aligns with Confucian values, discouraging overt individualism or dissent.

2.3 State and Institutional Reinforcement of Confucian Ethics

Beyond the family and education system, the Chinese government actively promotes Confucian ethics, including *Keji Fuli*, as part of its broader vision for national identity and social stability. Over the past two decades, China has witnessed a revival of Confucian thought, with state policies reinforcing traditional values as a counterbalance to perceived Western cultural influences. Initiatives such as the *Core Socialist Values* campaign emphasize discipline, integrity, and collectivism, aligning closely with *Keji Fuli*'s principles. In an effort to maintain cultural continuity and social harmony, institutions ranging from universities to corporate workplaces subtly encourage Confucian-based behaviors. Within these environments, individuals are expected to embody self-restraint, avoid excessive self-promotion, and prioritize group cohesion. These institutional frameworks, in turn, shape how adolescents perceive and enact their self-expression, often leading them to adopt a tempered approach to individuality.

While Confucianism no longer dictates every aspect of Chinese society as it did in imperial times, *Keji Fuli* remains a powerful cultural force shaping adolescent self-expression. From family expectations and educational structures to digital platforms and state policies, the emphasis on self-restraint and propriety continues to influence how young people articulate their identities. As China continues to modernize, the challenge for adolescents lies in navigating this complex cultural terrain—balancing the Confucian call for restraint with the modern drive for self-expression. Whether this balance will shift toward greater individuality or remain tethered to traditional values is a question that continues to unfold in contemporary Chinese society.

3. Challenges to Adolescent Self-Expression

Despite China's economic and technological advancements, Confucian values continue to exert significant influence over youth development and identity formation. The principle of *Keji Fuli*, which emphasizes self-restraint and adherence to social norms, often conflicts with the growing desire among adolescents for personal expression and self-identity. As contemporary Chinese youth navigate this tension, they encounter a range of challenges rooted in family expectations, educational pressures, social conformity, and digital limitations.

3.1 Family Expectations and Filial Piety

Family plays a central role in shaping adolescent behavior in China, with Confucian values reinforcing a hierarchical structure where respect for elders and parental authority is paramount. The expectation to practice *Keji Fuli* within the family unit often means that adolescents must suppress their personal desires and conform to their parents' expectations. This is particularly evident in career choices, educational aspirations, and even personal interests. Many Chinese parents emphasize academic excellence, believing that success in school is a reflection of family honor. Consequently, adolescents may feel pressure to prioritize disciplined study over creative pursuits or personal exploration. Expressing emotions such as frustration or dissent can be viewed as a failure to uphold *xiao* (孝), or filial piety, leading many young people to internalize their struggles rather than openly communicate their feelings. This creates an environment where self-expression is not actively encouraged, leaving adolescents to find alternative outlets for their emotions—sometimes through anonymous online platforms or artistic expression that aligns with societal norms.

3.2 The Role of the Education System in Shaping Self-Expression

China's education system is another significant factor that shapes adolescent self-expression. The schooling experience is highly structured and discipline-oriented, emphasizing *mianzi*, obedience, and collective responsibility over personal exploration. The *Gaokao* (高考) college entrance exam system exemplifies this, as students are expected to dedicate years to rigorous academic preparation, leaving little room for personal interests or free thought. According to H. Zhang, Confucian ideals embedded within the educational system reinforce collective identity over personal autonomy, discouraging adolescents from developing independent voices (Zhang, 2009). Classroom discussions often focus on memorization and standardized responses rather than critical thinking or open debate, limiting opportunities for students to develop their own perspectives. Creative arts and personal expression are often sidelined in favor of disciplines that are perceived to offer more economic stability, such as science, engineering, and business. Even extracurricular activities are shaped by these cultural constraints. While some schools promote artistic pursuits, such as calligraphy or traditional Chinese music, these are often framed as extensions of cultural heritage rather than avenues for personal self-expression. As a result, many young people struggle to articulate their unique identities within the confines of an education system that prioritizes conformity and collective achievement over individuality.

3.3 Social Conformity and Peer Expectations

In addition to family and educational pressures, Chinese adolescents face significant social expectations that reinforce self-restraint and discourage radical self-expression. Peer groups often play a crucial role in enforcing societal norms, and deviation from these norms can lead to social exclusion or criticism. The collectivist nature of Chinese society means that standing out too much—whether through unconventional fashion, outspoken opinions, or artistic expression—can be perceived as socially inappropriate.

This pressure to conform is particularly evident in gender expectations. Traditional Confucian ideals emphasize distinct roles for men and women, with expectations that girls should be reserved and modest while boys should display discipline and responsibility. Adolescents who challenge these gender norms—such as those exploring non-traditional gender identities or engaging in subcultures like punk or hip-hop—may face greater social scrutiny. As a result, many young people feel compelled to moderate their self-expression to align with socially accepted behaviors. The concept of *mianzi* plays a crucial role in this phenomenon. Fear of losing face or bringing shame to one's family can discourage adolescents from publicly expressing controversial opinions or engaging in behavior that might be deemed rebellious. This extends to social interactions, where maintaining a harmonious and respectable public image is often prioritized over genuine self-expression.

3.4 Digital Expression: A Double-Edged Sword

In contrast to the structured offline world, digital spaces offer Chinese adolescents new opportunities for self-expression. Social media platforms like WeChat, Weibo, Douyin (China's TikTok), and Bilibili have become crucial outlets for young people to explore their identities, share their thoughts, and engage with diverse communities. However, even in these spaces, the Confucian legacy of *Keji Fuli* persists, as online expression is often moderated by both social norms and government regulations. Chinese youth must carefully navigate what they post online, as state policies regulate digital discourse, and controversial content can be censored. While social media allows for the illusion of greater freedom, the reality is that certain forms of self-expression—such as political dissent, radical individuality, or critiques of traditional values—remain restricted. Instead, many adolescents adopt a practice of "coded self-expression," where they subtly convey personal opinions through art, humor, or indirect language. For example, some young people use symbolism and metaphors in digital storytelling or memes to express dissatisfaction with societal expectations while avoiding direct confrontation. Others engage in *danmu* (弹幕, "bullet comments") on video-sharing platforms, where fleeting, scrolling messages allow them to voice their thoughts in an ephemeral manner. These strategies enable adolescents to balance self-expression with the Confucian principle of self-restraint, highlighting their adaptability within cultural and regulatory constraints.

3.5 The Psychological Toll of Suppressed Self-Expression

One of the most concerning aspects of the tension between *Keji Fuli* and adolescent self-expression is its psychological impact. Studies have shown that suppressing emotions and self-identity can lead to stress, anxiety, and even depression among young people. The pressure to conform, maintain family honor, and succeed academically can create a high-stress environment where adolescents feel trapped between personal aspirations and societal obligations. In cases where self-expression is continually stifled, young people may resort to alternative means of coping, such as anonymous online interactions, subcultural affiliations, or even rebellion against traditional norms. However, for those who lack such outlets, the emotional burden can be overwhelming, leading to internalized struggles with self-worth and identity. At the same time, some youth find ways to channel their self-expression in culturally acceptable ways, such as engaging in socially respected art forms like poetry, traditional Chinese painting, or philosophical discourse. These mediums allow for creative freedom while still aligning with Confucian values of cultural preservation and intellectual refinement.

The challenge of self-expression for Chinese adolescents is deeply rooted in the enduring influence of *Keji Fuli*. Family expectations, educational structures, social conformity, and digital restrictions collectively shape how young people navigate their identities in a rapidly modernizing yet traditionally bound society. While digital platforms offer new possibilities for self-expression, they also impose limitations that reflect the broader cultural and political landscape. As China continues to evolve, the future of adolescent self-expression will likely depend on the extent to which traditional values can adapt to new social realities. Whether Confucian ideals will continue to suppress individualism or be reinterpreted in ways that allow for greater personal freedom remains an open question. What is clear, however, is that young people in China today are not passive recipients of tradition; rather, they are actively negotiating their identities within a complex interplay of history, modernity, and digital innovation.

4. Social Media and New Forms of Expression

4.1 The Rise of Social Media as a Cultural Outlet

With the rapid advancement of digital technology, social media has become a primary avenue for self-expression among Chinese adolescents. Platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, Douyin, Bilibili, and Xiaohongshu have revolutionized the way young people navigate personal identity, social interactions, and cultural affiliations. Unlike traditional forms of self-expression, which are often constrained by family expectations, educational pressures, and societal norms, digital platforms provide new opportunities for identity exploration, community engagement, and creative innovation.

However, social media in China operates within a unique cultural and regulatory framework that continues to reflect Confucian ideals, particularly *Keji Fuli*. While these platforms provide a space for youth to express themselves, they also enforce boundaries shaped by social norms, peer expectations, and government regulations. As a result, adolescent self-expression online is not entirely free but is instead strategically curated to align with acceptable cultural values.

4.2 The Art of Curated Self-Expression

Unlike in many Western digital cultures, where social media is often used as a tool for raw, unfiltered self-presentation, Chinese youth tend to engage in "curated self-expression." This means that while they may share aspects of their thoughts, interests, and identities, they do so in a way that aligns with societal expectations rather than directly challenging them. For example, on WeChat, China's most widely used social platform, young

people are often connected with family members, teachers, and future employers. As a result, their posts are carefully moderated to avoid controversial topics or personal revelations that may bring shame or conflict. On Weibo, a more public and open social platform, youth engage in discussions about pop culture and trending topics but remain cautious of politically sensitive issues. Douyin, a short-video platform, allows for creative self-expression through dance, music, and humor, yet content generally adheres to mainstream values, such as familial respect, cultural heritage, and educational motivation. Similarly, Xiaohongshu, initially a lifestyle-sharing platform, has evolved into a space where young people present aspirational and socially acceptable versions of themselves, often focusing on personal growth, beauty, and career success rather than radical individualism. This kind of curated self-expression enables young people to maintain a balance between individuality and cultural expectations, allowing them to engage with modern identity trends while still adhering to the values of *Keji Fuli*.

4.3 Online Anonymity and Subtle Resistance

Despite the constraints of social norms and digital regulations, many adolescents find ways to push boundaries through anonymity, coded language, and indirect communication. One such strategy is *danmu*, a unique feature on platforms like Bilibili, where users can post real-time comments that scroll across the screen while watching videos. This format allows young people to express humor, sarcasm, or mild dissent in a fleeting manner, reducing the risk of personal accountability. Another form of subtle resistance is the use of symbolism and metaphor. Many young people employ coded language, memes, and historical references to express dissatisfaction or alternative perspectives without directly confronting social norms. Additionally, some create secondary accounts or pseudonymous profiles to explore aspects of their identity—such as unconventional aesthetics, gender expression, or countercultural interests—without the fear of judgment or social repercussions. While these strategies allow adolescents to push against traditional values, they also demonstrate the pervasive influence of *Keji Fuli*. Even when expressing resistance, young people often do so within the constraints of tact and discretion, avoiding direct defiance.

4.4 Digital Subcultures and Youth Identity

Beyond mainstream social media, many adolescents engage with digital subcultures as an alternative means of self-expression and identity formation. These subcultures, often inspired by global trends, provide young people with a sense of belonging while allowing them to explore individuality in a collective setting.

One prominent example is fandom culture, where young people participate in highly organized online communities dedicated to supporting pop idols, K-pop stars, or video game influencers. Within these communities, self-expression takes the form of digital art, fan fiction, and organized activism. However, even in these spaces, collective loyalty and group identity are often emphasized over radical self-expression.

Similarly, the rise of cyberpunk aesthetics, anime, and alternative fashion movements provides another avenue for creative self-representation. Platforms like Bilibili have become hubs for anime, comic, and gaming (ACG) content, where young people explore fictional identities that may not be socially acceptable in real life. LGBTQ+ communities, independent music movements, and underground art scenes also thrive in niche online spaces, offering a refuge for those who do not conform to mainstream societal norms.

Although these subcultures offer an outlet for individuality, they still operate within a broader cultural landscape that values restraint and social harmony. Young people often modify their self-expression to ensure they remain within an acceptable range of social behavior.

4.5 The Government's Role in Digital Self-Expression

While digital platforms provide new opportunities for self-expression, they are also subject to government intervention. Chinese authorities have implemented various policies to regulate youth engagement with online platforms, reinforcing Confucian ideals of discipline and social stability. One such policy is the restriction of online gaming time for minors, aimed at reducing distractions from academic and moral development. Additionally, censorship policies actively remove content deemed politically sensitive, excessively individualistic, or morally inappropriate. The government also promotes "positive energy", encouraging content that aligns with values of optimism, patriotism, and social responsibility. These regulations shape the way adolescents present themselves online, reinforcing an environment where self-expression must align with societal values rather than personal desires. At the same time, the state encourages cultural innovation, supporting digital initiatives that promote traditional heritage and national identity. This means that while young people can engage in creative expression, their digital presence must remain within the bounds of accepted cultural narratives.

Social media has provided Chinese adolescents with unprecedented opportunities for self-expression, yet this expression remains deeply shaped by the enduring influence of *Keji Fuli*. While digital platforms allow young people to explore their identities, they do so within cultural and regulatory constraints that emphasize

self-restraint, social harmony, and respect for traditional values. Rather than openly rejecting Confucian ideals, many adolescents adapt to them, engaging in curated self-expression, indirect communication, and participation in controlled digital subcultures. Whether through carefully crafted WeChat posts, subtle Weibo commentary, or creative engagement in online fandoms, young people in China navigate a complex terrain where modernity and tradition coexist. The evolution of social media as a tool for self-expression in China will likely continue to reflect this delicate balance, with digital culture both expanding and reinforcing the Confucian legacy of *Keji Fuli* in contemporary society.

5. Conclusion

The impact of *Keji Fuli* on adolescent self-expression in contemporary China is a nuanced and evolving phenomenon, reflecting the ongoing negotiation between Confucian tradition and the rapid transformations brought about by digitalization, globalization, and social change. While Confucian values continue to promote social harmony, respect for authority, and moral discipline, they also impose constraints on individual self-expression. At the same time, modern digital platforms, changing social dynamics, and increased exposure to diverse global perspectives are creating new avenues for Chinese youth to articulate their identities in ways that were previously unavailable. In this complex cultural landscape, young people are not simply passive recipients of Confucian ideals, nor are they outright rebels against tradition. Instead, they exhibit a remarkable ability to navigate the tension between restraint and self-expression, selectively integrating aspects of Confucian ethics with modern individualism. Social media has emerged as a critical tool in this process, enabling adolescents to explore different versions of their identities while still adhering to cultural expectations of respectability and self-restraint. On platforms like WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin, self-expression is carefully curated to align with social norms, allowing for the coexistence of personal voice and cultural conformity.

However, the boundaries of self-expression in China remain shaped by both social and political forces. The state's reinforcement of Confucian ethics through education, media, and digital governance continues to shape young people's perspectives on identity, self-discipline, and moral conduct. Government censorship and social norms discourage excessive individualism and open dissent, ensuring that expressions of personal identity remain within a framework of collective responsibility and national stability. As a result, even in digital spaces that offer new possibilities for self-expression, many adolescents engage in forms of self-censorship, self-moderation, and indirect communication that reflect the deep-rooted influence of *Keji Fuli*. Despite these constraints, the landscape of self-expression in China is not static. The country's rapid technological advancements, growing youth subcultures, and shifting socio-economic conditions mean that traditional values are being continuously reinterpreted. The resurgence of interest in traditional Chinese culture—seen in the popularity of Hanfu fashion, classical poetry, and Confucian thought—suggests that many young people are not rejecting *Keji Fuli* outright but are instead seeking ways to reconcile it with modern aspirations. This demonstrates that self-expression in China is not merely about Western notions of individuality versus Confucian collectivism but is instead about reconfiguring identity within a uniquely Chinese cultural framework.

The future of adolescent self-expression in China will likely continue to be defined by a delicate balance between tradition and modernity. As digital platforms evolve, they may provide greater room for diverse forms of self-representation while still functioning within the parameters of Confucian social ethics. The question remains whether future generations will challenge these boundaries more openly or find new ways to adapt them to the changing world. Regardless of the trajectory, what is clear is that Chinese adolescents are actively shaping their own narratives, blending heritage and innovation to create expressions of identity that are both uniquely personal and distinctly Chinese.

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